

"WE COULD NOT STAY SILENT ANYMORE"

Interview with Carlos Chen Osorio (Guatemala News and Information Bureau,
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Carlos Chen Osorio is a survivor of the 1982 massacres against the Maya-Achí community of Río Negro, Rabinal, Baja Verapaz. After living in hiding for ten years following the massacres, Carlos returned to Rabinal in 1993, determined to break the silence about what had happened to his community. He co-founded ADIVIMA (Association for Development for the Maya-Achí Victims of Violence), the first local human rights and development organization dedicated to, amongst other things, exhuming clandestine cemeteries in the Rabinal area, bringing the perpetrators of the massacres to justice, and obtaining reparations from the Guatemalan government, World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank.

WHEN AND HOW DID THE PEOPLE OF RÍO NEGRO FIRST HEAR ABOUT THE CHIXOY DAM PROJECT?

In 1976 representatives from INDE (Guatemalan National Electric Institute) came to Río Negro by helicopter. They told us about the project and tried to convince us that we would be able to live a better life, that we would be given more land, a fish cooperative, bridges, etc. ... We didn't know exactly what they were going to do; we just knew the river was a blessing from God and no one should ever cover or block it. [W]e ... didn't want to abandon our land. It isn't the same to live on land different from the land you were born on, especially when you depend on the land for your very survival. Río Negro is our ancestral land; it had been good to our ancestors and good to us. It provided us with firewood, palm to make petate (straw mats), other materials to build our houses, fish to feed us. The land was good for farming; it didn't require fertilizer to grow corn, beans, or fruit trees.

At one point the INDE representatives told us that the government was responsible for making this decision, not us, and that if necessary they would relocate us by force. We told them that this land belonged to our ancestors, which means it is our land and not the government's, and therefore it is our decision to make. Tension was rising

We formed a negotiating committee to represent the community. In 1978, 20 families negotiated a multipoint agreement with INDE to resettle on some land near the town of Rabinal, called Pacux. Part of the agreement stated that INDE would build cinder block houses for the community. But when the 20 families arrived in 1980 and saw that INDE was building poor quality wood houses, they went back to Río Negro frustrated and convinced that resistance was the only route to take. INDE had broken the agreement once, and would probably do so again.

WHEN DID THE REPRESSION BEGIN?

I really feel that if it hadn't been for the dam, the military would never have come to Río Negro. We used to be so remote; there was not even any access by road. But with the construction of the dam, roads were built, and the military suddenly had much better access to our community.

The violence began on March 4, 1980, after two men were accused of stealing from the construction company's store. When the community protested against these accusations, three company security guards opened fire, killing seven people. A security guard was injured and died that day too. But that was just the beginning. Shortly thereafter the military began to threaten and persecute us, coming to our village in groups of 300, sometimes 400 at a time.

On July 10, 1980, two members of the negotiation committee were bringing the community's land titles to the dam site at the request of INDE when they were kidnapped and later found dead with signs of torture; the deeds were never found.

Many of us had individual titles, and the community had a title for the finca Los Pajales and another for communal land in Río Negro proper. We also shared a large finca with two other communities, which we used for our cattle and to plant corn and palm. Altogether, we owned a total of 22.5 caballerías (1440 hectares).

The threats persisted. I was scared. Before all of this I had always thought the military protected the country and its people. I didn't know they were capable of such atrocities, that they were assassins. ...

Later in 1981, the PACs [paramilitary civilian defense patrols, under control of the Army] were established, which only fortified the military's presence in our area,

On February 13, 1982, community members were told to bring their identification cards to the neighboring village of Xococ, which by then had been turned into a civil patrol outpost. Seventy-four villagers who went never returned. They were massacred and buried in a clandestine cemetery.

On March 13, 1982, the military and the PACs killed 70 women and 107 children in Río Negro. Eighteen children survived [and were] kept as slaves for the civil patrollers. That was when I lost my family - my wife, who was nine months pregnant at the time, and my two children. According to an eyewitness, my wife's unborn baby was removed from her uterus while she was still alive.

After that, most of us sought refuge in the mountains, but one group fled to Los Encuentros, a small [hamlet] nearby. On May 14, 1982, the military came to Los Encuentros in Cogefar's truck [Cogefar was the Italian construction company Commissioned to build the dam] and massacred another 79 people before taking 15 women away in a helicopter. The 15 women were never seen again.

September 14, 1982, 92 more campesinos were killed in Agua Fría, including about 35 Río Negro children who had been orphaned from previous massacres.

WHAT DID YOU DO AFTER THESE MASSACRES? WHEN AND HOW WAS ADIVIMA FORMED?

I was hiding in the mountains. When General Efraín Ríos Montt began campaigning in 1983 saying that peace had arrived, and that there wouldn't be any more killings, many of my compañeros went back to Pacux and turned themselves in. Of course, Ríos Montt's words were not true and those compañeros fell under the military's control.

By then the military was using the houses in Pacux [the so-called INDE relocation village] as a military base, claiming that the houses were theirs since the government had built them. The survivors of the massacre had their hands tied; there was no way to organize again.

In February of 1986, during Vinicio Cerezo's government, I managed to return to the village with others. But shortly thereafter two campesinos disappeared and we decided to leave again. Some went to Izabal, others to Escuintla. I went to Retalheu I was there for eight years working as a bus assistant. But I could never get out of my head what had happened in Rabinal, that there remained

nothing but silence, that the people couldn't do anything because they were so heavily controlled and threatened by the military.

... So I had to figure out a way to go to Rabinal. ... [Finally], I arrived and [went first to talk with the parish priest.] ... One young man, who [as a boy] had lost his father, mother and siblings, agreed to help. The two of us went to Guatemala City and denounced the massacre, and then we filed the complaint at the public prosecutor's office in Salamá, the capital of Baja Verapaz.

Finally, ... on October 8, 1993, the exhumation of the Río Negro massacre began. ... [After the exhumation had ended], I insisted that we couldn't stop there because there were more sites to be exhumed. The exhumation of the Río Negro massacre was just the beginning of our efforts to seek justice. That was when we formed ADIVIMA, in 1994. We began to collect more testimonies; many people came forth to tell us where such and such family was buried, etc. It saddened me tremendously, and we were scared too. But little by little we carried out our work.

Now we have denounced 65 clandestine cemeteries to the public prosecutor's office, and we have completed seven additional exhumations. We have built a monument that bears witness to the Río Negro massacre; it has the names of all of the victims, the names of those responsible, and what happened on that day.

WHAT KIND OF REPARATIONS ARE YOU ASKING THE GUATEMALAN GOVERNMENT TO PAY THE SURVIVORS OF RÍO NEGRO?

We are preparing a proposal to demand that the government pay direct reparations to the individual massacre survivors and to the community as a whole. ... In terms of land, they only gave us two caballerías (128 hectares) to start out with, and the land was terrible. It had steep ravines; we couldn't plant, nor could we raise cattle on it. It was not until 1998 that we were given five more caballerías [as a result of international pressure on the World Bank to urge the Guatemalan government to provide the community with more land], and though the land is okay, it is in another department. It takes five hours by car to get there, and longer by bus. We don't have the money to pay the bus fare nor do we have seed money to begin planting. At this point there aren't any houses there, nor running water. And this doesn't even add up to the 22.5 caballerías that we lost. The government still owes us 15 (960 hectares).

Also, when the military committed the massacre, they took with them our 300 head of cattle and 20 mules, as well as everything else of value that we had. Over the course of the years they have given us minimal amounts of money to compensate for that loss, which we have used to buy cattle. But in the end we have not been fully compensated, and as a result, the survivors of the massacre truly live in extreme poverty.

ARE YOU REQUESTING A SIMILAR REPARATIONS PACKET FROM THE WB AND THE IDB?

At first we blamed the situation entirely on the government for insisting on building a dam. But when we began to understand where the money came from to build the dam, we started to see that the WB and the IDB should be held accountable for our current situation as well.

The reparations packet we are presenting to the World Bank and IDB includes building houses because the few that INDE built in Pacux are falling down, and over 40 families still don't have houses; they are forced to live with other families. We are also demanding more land, compensation for the losses we have experienced by not being able to cultivate much since the massacre, and individual reparations for the widows and orphans, who have suffered severe

economic hardships as a result of not having heads of households to generate income. We also want schools and medicines for our children, and we want to build a memorial museum in Rabinal so that future generations know the truth about what happened in our community.

WHAT DO YOU HOPE TO ACCOMPLISH IN YOUR UPCOMING MEETINGS [APRIL 2000] WITH THE WB AND THE IDB IN WASHINGTON DC?

I hope that the banks will understand that the funding they have provided for projects such as the Chixoy dam has not contributed to development; rather it has served to destroy communities. I want them to understand that the majority of dams they fund only benefit the wealthy, not the poor. I want them to understand how these dams affect poor people, how they sink us deeper into extreme poverty.

Unfortunately, our community serves as a good example. We don't have any work, we don't have firewood to cook our food, we don't have palm to make petate. There are ten families that don't even have electricity, the very thing that the dam was supposed to provide.

In 1996, the World Bank finally admitted that a massacre had taken place while they were constructing the dam, but they didn't take any responsibility for it. I hope that this new campaign forces the World Bank and IDB to understand what they have done, that the people of Río Negro were killed because of our resistance to the project they funded. And then I hope the banks analyze how they can help alleviate the damage they have caused. In the end the survivors were left with absolutely nothing. I hope that someday we are paid reparations.

WHAT ARE YOUR PLANS FOR FUTURE WORK?

... We will also be focusing a lot of our energy on reparations. For me, forgiveness will come only after the clandestine cemeteries have been exhumed, after the damages have been repaired, after the widows and orphans have received help, after the community is paid restitution. For twenty years we have had no answers, we have received next to nothing. Now it is time, and we will continue to fight for reparations and justice, no matter how long the struggle lasts. I know the road won't be easy, but we have to continue fighting.
